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C O N F I D E N T I A L TOKYO 003078

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SUBJECT: SENIOR VICE MINISTER ASANO'S SYRIA MEETINGS

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer. Reasons: 1.4 (b)(d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Syria must tighten its border controls and use its influence to help resolve internal strife in Lebanon, Senior Vice Minister Asano told Syrian President Al-Asad in Damascus on June 25. Asano delivered a "strong message" from Prime Minister Abe during his visit, according to a June 28 MOFA readout. Al-Asad's answers, denying arms smuggling across Syria's borders, disclaiming involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese President Hariri, and denying support for Hamas, were "nothing new," MOFA noted. End summary.

¶2. (C) Senior Vice Minister Katsuhito Asano met with Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad at his private residence in Damascus for approximately an hour on the morning of June 25, MOFA 1st Middle East Division Principal Deputy Director Jun Nanazawa told Embassy Tokyo Political Officer on June 28. (NOTE: Nanazawa had provided a heads-up on the planned visit on June 22.) Foreign Minister Walid Al-Mouallem and Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Al-Miqdad also joined Asano's meeting with Al-Asad. Miqdad met with Asano again separately, and also hosted him for lunch. Asano had no other official meetings. The primary product of the visit was the signing of an agreement for Japan to fund a new health center.

¶3. (C) During his meeting with President Al-Asad, SVM Asano delivered a letter from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pledging continued Japanese assistance for Syria's social and economic development, Nanazawa reported. The letter also urged Syria to play a more constructive role in bringing stability to the Middle East. Asano used the meeting to deliver a "strong message" to the Syrians on the need to take seriously the concerns of the international community. He urged Syria to tighten its border controls with Lebanon and Iraq, and to use its influence in Lebanon to help resolve internal political strife. Asano also encouraged Syria to cooperate with the international tribunal investigating the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The international community expects Syria to play an important role in the investigation, Asano told Al-Asad. Doing so would help Syria win the confidence of the international community.

¶4. (C) The lack of a strong central government in Iraq and internal political problems in Lebanon make it difficult for Syria to engage the two countries on border control issues, President Al-Asad claimed. This is in sharp contrast to good border cooperation with Turkey, which shares a much longer border with Syria, he added. Al-Asad insisted that Syria is

in full compliance with UNSC Resolution 1701 and that it has not cooperated in attempts to smuggle weapons across its borders. He reminded Asano that he had asked the United States, Germany, and other countries to provide Syria with equipment to help strengthen its border control, such as night-vision goggles, but without success. Syrian personnel are posted every two kilometers along the Iraq border, he said, but corruption is a constant problem. President Al-Asad expressed concern that "disturbances" in Iraq could spread to parts of Europe and Asia. He also criticized the U.S. for pulling out of the three-party joint committee with Syria and Iraq in 2004, Nanazawa noted.

¶15. (C) Former Lebanese President Hariri was a friend of Syria, Al-Asad told Asano, and the international tribunal has made clear that Syria's cooperation in the investigation into his assassination has been satisfactory. If Syrian nationals were involved in the assassination, he said, they have committed treason, and would receive the death penalty under Syrian law. Syria cannot, however, accept "politically-motivated" criticism that "lacks evidence," Al-Asad said. The stability of Lebanon is in Syria's national interest and peace in Lebanon can go a long way toward eliminating the threat of terrorism. Al-Asad described Lebanon as "smaller than a Syrian province," but capable of having an impact "bigger than an atomic bomb." He called for greater economic cooperation to help alleviate radicalism. Nanazawa observed that President Al-Asad's responses, basically dismissing Japan's concerns, were "nothing new."

¶16. (C) Unifying Fatah and Hamas is the key to peace and stability in the Middle East, President Al-Asad asserted, citing Syrian attempts to mediate between the two. He noted that a senior Fatah official had just visited Syria on June 24 for discussions on ending the internal political strife in the West Bank and the Gaza. Of approximately 500,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria, he claimed, there were no more than 10 Hamas "cadre." He emphasized that Syria has maintained relations with Fatah for nearly 40 years, as opposed to the much more recent relationship with Hamas.

SCHIEFFER